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“Shafter Silver Mine History”

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Shafter Silver Mine, Shafter District, Presidio Co., Texas, USA-The Shafter Silver Mine, operated by Aurcana Corporation (Canada) was started in 2008, to recover an estimated 47 million ounces of silver (8-10 oz./ton of ore) remaining in a northeast (down-dip) extension of the old Presidio mine workings (abandoned in 1942). Aurcana purchased the Presidio Mine and surrounding property in 2008. The silver mineralization in the Shafter deposit is hosted by the Mina Grande formation (limestone), in a carbonate replacement deposit, along a northeasterly trend extending about 3-miles. As of early 2009, a 1,052 foot, 7-foot diameter production shaft serviced by an 80 ton/hour hoist, and 5,100 feet of underground development has been built. The plan is to recover 3.2 million ounces of silver per year at startup. Installation of an underground crusher is planned, and ore will be processed in above-ground leach tanks. Text courtesy of MINDAT.ORG Photograph courtesy of Aurcana Corporation (Canada)

Shafter was once a bustling mining town with a population of over 4,000 habitants nestled in a bend of Cibolo Creek in the Chinati Mountains of Texas' Big Bend country. This is pretty hard to believe today when you pass the "Shafter Ghost Town" sign on Highway 67 and look out over the scattering of houses and ruins that only thirty or so folks call home today. John W. Spencer, Presidio rancher and businessman, was the first to mark this location back in 1883. When returning from a trip to Fort Davis he found areas that were rich with silver ore in the Chinati Mountains of Presidio County, Texas. He took ore samples to Lt. Col. William R. Shafter who was at the time garrisoned at Fort Davis, Texas. Later on, the Presidio Mining Company was organized by John W. Spencer and Lt. Col. Shafter with other Army officers in 1885. This led the town of Shafter to be born. Operations continued until the early 1940's, which contributed greatly to the economy of Texas and regions of Mexico.

Life was just beginning for the new mining district. Established in 1888, the church became a huge part to the town's social life. Festivals, music, education, church services, etc.... were all centered on the Catholic Church. Construction continued on the large adobe sanctuary complex for about 6 years until a school, rooms and space for a priest and nuns were created and added. Another key feature to Shafter's social life was having a solid foundation based on religious and educated beliefs. This ameliorated the rough and lawless atmosphere common in western mining towns of the period.



The "ghost town" of Shafter-Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church in the background is still in use for the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite (Latin Mass). Tucked in the Chinati Mountains on Cibolo Creek, eighteen miles north of Presidio, Shafter was once a bustling mining town with a population as high as four thousand in 1940. A Wikipedia photograph

Shafter had a total of four retail stores which supplied the town with goods. Everything from mining supplies to peppermint candy could be bought through these stores. Two saloons also operated from 1910 to 1920. The best bar in Shafter was the Giliberto Vasquez Saloon. A movie theater that lasted around two years was also part of the town. Three blacksmith shops said to be the most complete and best between San Antonio and El Paso could be found in Shafter. The Shafter post office was introduced around 1890 and lasted until 1999. Specialty stores were opened; the two best known were the Ice Plant run by George H. Brooks and the Ice Cream Parlor setup by George's sisters. Lastly, several stores supplied gasoline and automobile parts, mechanics were also setup to work on automobiles. Among these mechanics was William W. Brooks.



The Shafter Silver Mine-The Mill is illustrated in this 1890's photograph drawn from the Family History work of David Brooks of League City, Texas whose ancestor George Henry Brooks (1833-1911) worked at the mine and lived in Shafter with his family. George Henry Brooks (1833-1911) is buried in the Brooks Family Cemetery in Shafter, Texas. Descendants of George Henry Brooks (1833-1911) still work at the mine!

Getting silver ore out of the ground was just the first step towards silver production. A mill that could process the ore to a purer standard was a necessity. No mill, no silver. Constructed in 1883 – 1884, with an original structure of wood and tin roof, “The Mill” was added to the mines infrastructure. The location of the mill determined where Shafter was going to be located. The mill underwent through many changes throughout its production life. Steam boilers were the first power generators of the mill. This made water play a major role in the mills silver processing. Steam driven piston pumps were installed to crush the rocks. Tanks that held processing chemicals were also major elements. The chemicals used were arsenic, cyanide and mercury. Most of these chemicals were flushed out into the Cibolo Creek. Small pockets of

mercury can be found today in the crevices of rock ledges along the creek. Once processed, the stacks of silver ore were taken to a smelter in El Paso, to be melted down into silver bars.



The Shafter Silver Mine-The processed silver ore was hauled in sacks by wagon trains under guard to Marfa, Texas to be transported by rail to an El Paso, Texas smelter for refining to 99.9% purity level as “fine silver” for the commercial market. The photograph was drawn from the work of David Brooks

Electricity was provided to Shafter in DC form after a large generator, driven by steam, was installed. The power plant would provide power to machines inside the mill and was distributed through town by overhead power lines. By 1900, AC diesel generators were installed and everything DC had to be replaced. Larger AC diesel generators were installed in 1935, one of last major upgrades to the mill’s electrical system.

The mill never stopped growing, whether it was more boilers, holding tanks or expanding for more space. Silver production was never ending, leading to a tramway to carry ore from the mines to the mill to be constructed in 1913. Powered by the mill, an elaborate cable-driven bucket system pulling more ore to the mill than the mule team pulling wagons was developed. Now the new 300 ton mill installed the same year would pay off. 600 tons of ore could be processed each day improving productivity and profitability.

However, by the late 1930s and early 1940s, the mines were declining. The mines and mill became less and less productive. The amount of silver per ton of rock was decreasing. It was becoming unprofitable to keep the mines and mill running and some shutdowns had already happened by the late 1930s. Production costs increased when water was hit at the thousand-foot level and constant pumping was required to keep the mines from flooding. The final straw came with the War Powers Act of 1941 restricting availability of steel rail, copper wire, explosives, and other materials needed for the mining operation. The Shafter mine was closed down by 1942 with a production of more than 35 million ounces of silver since mining began. The large diesel generators were removed and sent off to Los Alamos, New Mexico. They would provide power for the development of the atomic bomb during World War II. With the mines shutting down, Shafter declined.

A shortage of construction materials following World War II led to many of the structures in Shafter being dismantled and hauled off. By 1950, the mill had been torn down; only the large concrete foundation and partial walls remain today.

In 1977 Gold Fields Mining Company took over the Shafter mine project. They invested more than \$20 million on the mines further development. 891 drill holes later, an eastern extension known as the “Shafter Deposit” was added to the mine. In 1994, Rio Grande Mining Company continued exploration and planned out production. In 1995 there was a major environmental clean-up project to bring the old mill site and tailings piles into compliance with Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission standards. Soil contaminated with lead, mercury, and other residues of the mining process were removed to a nearby arroyo and buried under a thick layer of clean soil. Fresh fill was brought in to stabilize the mill ruins and was planted with native grasses. Silver Standard Resources took over Rio Grande in 2001, but only relocated a 900 ton mill to the site.

Now the mine belongs to Aurcana Corporation of Vancouver, Canada. They bought the mine and surrounding areas in 2008. They’ve had a rough go of it since they started. Poor management decisions combined with breakdown prone second-hand equipment have delayed silver production despite the investment of over 60 million dollars. This, combined with a 35% decline in the price of silver in 2013 has led to the moth-balling of the Shafter silver mine and new mill, after which most of the employees will be let go. As the mine was responsible for approximately 130 jobs, this is a hard blow for south Presidio County. Although the known silver reserves are considerable, it remains to be seen if and when the precious metal will once again flow from Texas’ richest silver mine.

References: The text of the article was drawn form Wikipedia, the website of the Aurcana Corporation (Canada) and the Brooks Family History work of David Brooks.

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FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT

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